

## **ARE WE A CHRISTIAN NATION?**

**by Forrest Gilmore, © 2005**

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”  
- from the First Amendment

Tom Delay, the former Majority Leader of the US House of Representatives said, “[God] is using me, all the time, everywhere, to stand up for a biblical worldview in everything that I do and everywhere I am. He is training me.”

Pat Robertson told his followers, “Rule the world for God.”

Christian Coalition field director, Bill Thomson, spoke of how to destroy what he called ‘leftist’ foes: “You’re going to run over them. Get around them, run over the top of them, destroy them - whatever you need to do so that God’s word is the word that is being practiced in Congress, town halls and state legislatures.”

George Grant, author, educator and former Executive Director of Coral Ridge Ministries, wrote, “Christians have an obligation, a mandate, a commission, a holy responsibility to reclaim the land for Jesus Christ -- to have dominion in civil structures, just as in every other aspect of life and godliness... It is dominion we are after. Not just a voice... World conquest.”

Religion stands at the heart of so many of today’s political struggles: the Ten Commandments on the courtroom wall, ‘under God’ in the Pledge of Allegiance, prayer in schools, evolution in schools, international family planning, equal marriage rights, vouchers, the Terri Schiavo case, sexuality education, pharmacists refusing to prescribe emergency contraception, unwanted pregnancy, the Presidential funding of faith-based initiatives, the war on terror.

Yet, perhaps what is most frightening today is not a debate on particular issues, but what seems to be a growing movement towards complete governmental control.

Journalist Chris Hedges wrote, “This movement is a hybrid of fundamentalists, Pentecostals, Southern Baptists, Conservative Catholics, Charismatics and other evangelicals, all of whom are at war doctrinally, but who nonetheless share a belief that America is destined to become a Christian nation, led by Christian men who are in turn directed by God.”

We keep hearing this phrase in the media over and over again: “We are a Christian nation. We are a Christian nation.”

This phrase has become the motto of a very well organized minority within our country seeking to create one nation under their God.

Since the defeat of Goldwater, strategists have been attempting to organize politically the religious right. Former President Jimmy Carter said in a recent interview, “When I was younger, almost all Baptists were strongly committed on a theological basis to the separation of church and state. It was only 25 years ago when there began to be a melding of the Republican Party with fundamentalist Christianity, particularly with the Southern Baptist Convention. This is a fairly new development, and I think it was brought about by the abandonment of some of the basic principles of Christianity.”

Pat Robertson revealed this long-term plan when he told the *Denver Post* in 1992 that his goal was to “take working control of the Republican Party.” The Religious Right and their allies set up think tanks like the Heritage Foundation, Focus on the Family, Concerned Women for America, and the Council for National Policy. They trained thousands of pastors in political organizing and recruited churches to register millions of voters. They targeted countless elections in local precincts so they could eventually take over the state party apparatus.

According to the *Christian Statesman*, “Christian conservatives now hold a

majority of seats in 36% of all Republican Party state committees (or 18 of 50 states), plus large minorities in 81% of the rest, double their strength from a decade before.”

In 2004, 41 Republican senators and 1 Democrat, Zell Miller, received a 100% rating from the Christian Coalition and all 51 Republican senators received a 60% rating or better.

Christopher Shays, Republican Congressman from Connecticut, wrote in the New York Times, “[The] Republican Party of Lincoln has become a party of theocracy.”

In 1993, the president of the Alamo City, TX Republican Women's Club quit her post and in her resignation letter said, “The so-called Christian activists have finally gained control... and the Grand Old Party is more religious cult than political organization.”

And Frederick Clarkson of the Institute for First Amendment Studies wrote, “The wildest dreams of the Far Right in America may actually be within their reach - control of the Republican Party.”

These trends could seem quite scary to many of us. Regardless of our particular political affiliations, I know most Americans have a strong commitment to religious freedom and the separation of church and state. I have shared with you some quotes from Republicans and also an evangelical Christian to show to you that the issue I raise is not about the Republican Party or even for that matter conservative Christianity. It’s about theocracy... the takeover of America by people who will destroy its most deeply held values.

I hate to use such rhetoric, but a political war awaits us. This growing threat to democracy will not go away by itself. We will not be able to hide in our homes from it. We will not be able to claim that our lives are too busy to deal with it. This issue is here

with us and it intends to stay. Perhaps, we will need to wait for a time when we feel more threatened in order for us to take action. Or perhaps, we will choose not to wait until things get so far along.

Hope lies in our history.

The Enlightenment value, E Pluribus Unum (Out of the Many, One), deeply impacted the thinking of our nation's founders, such as Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin. What was to become our national motto influenced the founders' strong belief in the right of conscience and the separation of church and state.

The Constitution expresses this truth so well with the guarantee of religious freedom in the First Amendment and the fact that God is not mentioned once in the entire document.

Thomas Jefferson says it so eloquently in a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association in 1802. "Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship... I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between church and State."

And the Treaty of Tripoli, unanimously ratified by the United States Senate in 1797, is as blunt as you can get. The first line in the second article reads, "...the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion..."

So, if we are not a Christian nation, then what are we?

We are a religiously free nation.

This freedom is good, yet we must be careful with it. Religious liberty has often been interpreted by secular society as freedom from religion, leading to an open hostility towards it. With this growing emergence of Christian conservatism standing for government control, it will be tempting to grow in anti-Christian sentiment. But religious scholar Karen Armstrong warns us to avoid this temptation: “Whenever you try to suppress a fundamentalist movement, you drive it to extremity... Before the Scopes ‘monkey’ trial—when the secular press ridiculed the fundamentalists and said they had no place in the modern agenda—fundamentalist Christians... had often been on the left of the political spectrum and had been willing to work alongside socialists and liberal Christians in the new slums of the industrializing North American cities. After the Scopes trial, they swung to the far right, where they remained. They felt humiliated by the media attack... There was a sense of loss of prestige, and, above all, a sense of fear.”

So, we cannot respond to the rise of theocracy by becoming anti-Christian as it will only fuel the fire, plus it’s profoundly disrespectful. Rather, to preserve religious liberty, we must rely on the very stirring heritage of our nation.

When someone says, “We are a Christian nation,” we can respond, “I always thought we were a religiously free nation. Are you saying we’re not?”

“But the founders were all Christians.”

“The founders believed that religion was between God and each person. Don’t you?”

“Our laws are founded on the Ten Commandments.”

“I thought our laws were founded on the Constitution. Are you saying they’re not?”

“Oh, you just hate Christians!”

“No, I love liberty. Don’t you?”

A basic law of political dialogue: He or she who frames the conversation wins the debate. In so much of the political rhetoric these days, people seek to create fights by throwing out wild statements, hoping that you’ll forget your own message and start debating their extremist point-of-view. Don’t fall for it. Choose your arguments and say what you intend.

There are many organizations you can get involved with to support religious liberty: Theocracy Watch (the source for many of the quotes in this piece), the Interfaith Alliance, Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, the ACLU, Sojourners, People for the American Way. But ultimately, we must do just as the theocratic right has done. We must politically organize in defense of E Pluribus Unum.

I have a hope that Americans will stand up for our most deeply held values. I have a hope that people of all faiths and traditions can worship as they choose. I have a hope that we human beings recognize our unity in diversity, our E Pluribus Unum. I have a hope that American values and American actions stand together like two mighty twin oaks. I have a hope that this country will travel down the memory of time, honored, treasured, praised, not because of its ferocity, but because of its generosity. I have hope. May we all have hope. Happy birthday, America. May we do your vision justice.